

A Snapshot of the Disability Community

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A COMMON MISSION. A WEALTH OF POSSIBILITIES.

Report Focus

The Adult Population with Disabilities (16–74) in Massachusetts: Its Size and Demographic/Socioeconomic Composition in 2003–2004

Introduction

Public policymaking and program planning in the fields of vocational rehabilitation and workforce development for people with disabilities require timely and reliable information on their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, types of disability, labor market behaviors and barriers, and geographic locations. To improve our knowledge of the state's working age (16–74 years) population with disabilities, an analysis of data from the American Community Surveys of 2003 and 2004 was undertaken with support from the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission. Findings for this population in Massachusetts were compared to those for New England and the U.S. over the same two-year period.

Demographic Characteristics

On average, during calendar years 2003–2004, there were about 509,000 persons ages 16–74 in Massachusetts with some type of disability. This group of individuals with disabilities accounted for 11.3% of the state's population of working age adults, 12% of New England's working age adults, and 13% of working age adults in the nation. Massachusetts ranked 8th lowest among the 50 states on this disability incidence measure in 2003–2004.

Women comprised a slight majority (52%) of the adult population with disabilities in Massachusetts in 2003–2004. Nearly 80% of adults with disabilities were White and non-Hispanic, while Hispanics accounted for 10% and Blacks slightly more than 6% of the state's population with disabilities. Relatively few adults with disabilities were under 25 years of age (8%), primarily reflecting the low incidence of disabilities among teens and 20–24 year olds. Two-thirds of the adults with disabilities were between 45 and 74 years of age. Adults who failed to graduate from high school or obtain a GED certificate comprised a disproportionate share of people with disabilities in the state (28%) while those holding a Bachelor's or more advanced degree accounted for only 15% of the population with disabilities.

Men and women in Massachusetts experienced a nearly identical incidence of disabilities. Disability rates, however, varied considerably across race-ethnic, educational, and age groups. Asians (7%) were the least likely to report a disability. Hispanics (17%) and persons of mixed race (18%) were most likely to report a disability. Disability rates were lowest for young adults (20–24) and those 25–34 years of age and rose steadily thereafter, peaking at 28% for those persons 65–74 years old (See Chart 1). The disability rate among Massachusetts adults declined steadily and steeply as the level of formal educational attainment increased. Nearly 25% of adults who failed to graduate from high school had disabilities versus only 4% to 5% of adults with a Bachelor's or higher degree. Links between educational attainment and the incidence of disability were strong among men and women, members of each major race-ethnic group, and across age groups.

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Disability rates for 16–74 year olds varied across the eight counties of the state for which American Community Survey (ACS) data were available. These disability rates ranged from lows of 8% in Middlesex and Norfolk Counties to a high of 16% in Hampden County. One of every five adult residents of the city of Springfield reported a disability compared to only 1 of 8 adult residents in the city of Boston.

Findings of a multivariate statistical analysis of the likelihood of a Massachusetts adult having a disability revealed that age, education, race-ethnicity, and nativity all significantly influenced the probability of disability. Being male and being Asian had no significant independent effects on the likelihood of an adult in Massachusetts having a disability relative to the base group (women and White non-Hispanics). Many of the adults with disabilities in Massachusetts reported multiple disabilities in the ACS surveys. Overall, 58% reported two or more types of disabilities. Adults reporting a disability that affected their ability to work often reported other types of disabilities. They were also less likely to be employed than most of their peers reporting other types of disabilities. The educational attainment of those reporting a work disability had a powerful impact on the likelihood of their being employed at the time of the 2003 and 2004 ACS surveys.

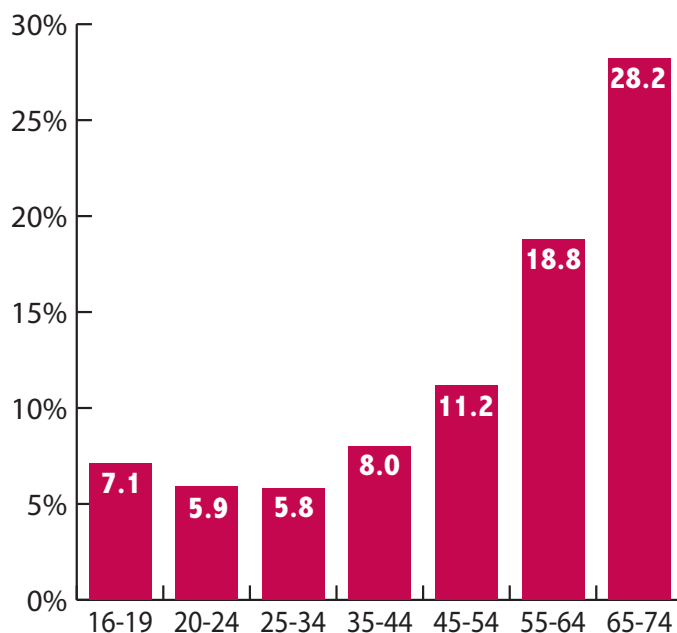
The Aging Population

The aging of the state's baby boom generation (those born between 1946 and 1964) is projected to have a substantial impact on both the size and age composition of the state's population of people with disabilities over the coming decade. Between 2004 and 2015, in the absence of any improvement in age-specific disability rates, the number of Massachusetts adults that are projected to have disabilities will rise by approximately 96,000 or 19%. The proportion of adults with disabilities in the 55–74 age group will increase 40% to 45% over the decade, even taking into account their improved educational attainment. These projected increases will have substantial consequences for the state's health care system, the vocational rehabilitation system, and the costs of the Medicaid program.

Implications

Many of the state's older people with disabilities (55–74) were jobless in 2003–2004. The aging of the state's working age population will constrain the growth of the resident labor force unless the attachment to the labor force of the older population (55–74), including persons with disabilities, is strengthened. The ability of the state's vocational rehabilitation system, the workforce development system, and the community college system to respond to the needs of older workers and populations with disabilities needs to be assessed and strengthened. Previous evaluations of the vocational rehabilitation program of the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission have revealed that the investments in this program raise the annual earnings of program participants sufficiently to justify the resources invested in the training of people with disabilities. Facilitating the employment of older workers and workers with disabilities into employment will help reduce poverty, increase the size of the state's resident labor force, the number of employed persons, the real output of the state economy, and state and federal tax revenues.

Chart 1: Percent of the Population in Massachusetts with disabilities by Age Group, 2003–2004 Averages



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